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ABSTRACT

Communication scholars are uniquely suited to developing and implementing mechanisms that will promote a multicultural dialogue and build community. Storytelling is one such mechanism. Storytelling can be beneficial to the spiritual psyche on both the individual and universal levels. The folktale "The Princess Who Wanted to See G-d" demonstrates how self-reflexivity is related to spiritual development. The search for spirituality demands that listeners reexamine their existing beliefs. However, storytelling is also an important mechanism for instilling spirituality on a group or universal level. The story itself becomes equipment for understanding the cultural elements of a given group. Part of the value in storytelling is the universality of the story. For the educator in the multicultural classroom, storytelling can help instill a sense of unity and peace in a classroom plagued by division and divisiveness. Peace is brought to the classroom by changing the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Through the process of identification, the members of a multicultural audience realize how they are joined. Dialogue that follows the storytelling session helps listeners to construct and assess lines of reasoning from multiple conflicting points of view. As an agent of moral change, storytelling is also important for the rhetorical critic. It provides an opportunity to link theory and practice in a way that is unique. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

# Storytelling in the Multicultural Classroom: A Study in Community Building

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"Storytelling in the Multicultural Classroom: A Study in Community Building"

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As a college junior, the author of this paper was a student leader in a freshmen orientation program at a large, midwestern university. The school had seen a great influx in minority enrollment, and with it, an increase in "hate crimes." To counteract the problem in minority-majority communication, the administrators developed a unit for the three-day freshman orientation session called "Celebrating Our Differences." While developed with good intentions, the unit was not successful. Of the group of ten first-year students, only two were considered "minority," and neither of the two students wished to stand out by demonstrating to the majority of the group how they were "different" from the mainstream. Instead, the two students isolated themselves from the rest of the group. Consequently, no one felt they had anything to "celebrate."

While "Celebrating our Differences" was an attempt to initiate multicultural dialogue, the activity fell short of its original goal--to create understanding among people of dissimilar ethnic backgrounds. In retrospect, while the orientation session was not well received by the students, university officials were reacting to changes in the demographic makeup of the United States. The "typical"

American is no longer one who can trace ethnic roots to Europe. Henry (1990) notes already one in four Americans define themselves as Hispanic or non-white. The change in the face of the United States has had many different ramifications on the "culture" of the country. The heating up of the "multicultural" education debate is just one of the by-products of a country changing from an "unum" emphasis to one more "pluribus."

Clearly, there is a serious need within the United States to develop a mechanism to bridge gaps and create discourse within cultures. Rhetorical critics are uniquely suited to the task of developing such a mechanism. As Rushing and Frentz (1991) note, ". . . [W]e must rethink the rhetorical and moral functions of discourse in general and reposition the critic as an agent of moral change." As agents of moral change, mechanisms developed must, as "ultimate goal," seek to create consubstantiality among peoples who see themselves as essentially dissimilar. One mechanism is the sharing of cultural traits through performance. As an activity of moral change, performance is used as a vehicle to increase communication among seemingly dissimilar individuals or groups. Anderson (1992) notes, "Finding a connection with difference--and rejecting separatism--is my rationale for performance as a means of promoting multiculturalism. . . " (4). The creation of dialogue through performance is an area that needs to be developed in our multicultural society.

The use of cultural folktales in a storytelling presentation is a specific performance technique and rhetorical device which can be used to develop multicultural dialogue among dissimilar groups. Folktales are unique in this application, because through the use of folktales, " . . . the reader can enter into another culture and recognize the universality of the wishes, dreams, and problems of people around the world" (Borsma 1987, p.1). The following study examines: 1. How storytelling functions as a dialogue builder, 2. How storytelling instills a sense of spirituality through self-reflexivity, and 3. Brings peace to a multicultural classroom plagued by division.

## Storytelling as Dialogue Builder

Because the United States is moving toward acknowledgment of its multi-ethnic roots, there has developed a need for people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to develop an understanding of one another. Such understanding is not always easily achieved. Many times people holding lifelong animosities do not realize they have the possibility of believing other ways. The role of the rhetorical critic is paramount to initiating change in attitude. To build dialogue, Kirkwood (1992) asserts ". . . rhetors can acquaint people with new and unsuspected possibilities of being and acting in the world" (p. 31). Rushing and Frentz (1991) claim, ". . . the critic has a responsibility not only to diagnose, but also to assist the

culture in understanding its options" (p. 410). One option which can promote dialogue in a multicultural setting is storytelling. Storytelling promotes both individual cultural identity and group identification among people of divergent ethnic backgrounds.

Storytelling functions as a dialogue builder by providing listeners an opportunity to reexamine their repertoire of behaviors. Both Sarris (1990) and Kirkwood (1983) note that some aspects of storytelling cause people to examine stereotypes held about persons of a different background or culture. The telling of folktales in particular is well suited to self-examination as, ". . . through folktales, the reader can enter into another culture and recognize the universality of the wishes, dreams, and problems of people around the world" (Borsma 1987, p.1).

## Storytelling as Spirituality

The benefit of storytelling may go beyond building dialogue. Storytelling can be beneficial to one's spiritual psyche on both individual and universal levels. The following folktale illustrates how storytelling creates self-reflexivity

"The Princess Who Wanted to See G-d"

This story is about a princess who never cried because she got everything she ever wanted. The princess now demands to see G-d. He father calls the Chief of Law and Order to carry out the command. He in turn shows the princess the Book of Laws and Punishments of the Kingdom which he claims are "as good as G-d." But the princess is not satisfied. Then the Chief of the Treasury is ordered to carry out her command. He shows the princess the vault filled with gold. But again the princess is not satisfied. Finally the

King himself begins to search for G-d so he can show Him to his daughter. Since he was unable t find G-d at home, the king wanders away from the palace and meets an old man who is planting a tree. When the King asks if the old man thinks he will live long enough to eat the fruits of that tree, the old man responds:

"No, but I expect my children will. . . Oh, it will surely be a fine tree some day, G-d willing, that is."

The King asks the old man to show G-d to the princess, and the old man agrees to try. First the old man asks the princess to visit someone. She reluctantly goes with the old man to a small shabby cottage. When the princess steps inside, she meets a young girl who is very poor but smiling. When she discovers that this girl, who has not bowed to the princess, has never been able to walk the princess quickly leaves the cottage and follows the old man back to the palace. When they reached the palace hall, the old man turned to her.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready? For what?" asked the princess. She had been so busy thinking of the other girl that she had forgotten all about herself. The old man smiled. ". . . Now close your eyes, hold up this mirror and look deep into your heart."

The princess closed her eyes and held up the mirror. Suddenly tears began to roll down the cheeks of the princess who had never cried. Big, soft, wet tears.

"Why are you crying?" asked the old man.

"I have been selfish all my life," she said, "and I did not know it until I saw that poor girl." She put the mirror down and opened her eyes.

"Oh sir, do you think it would help if I brought her some good soup, and maybe a pretty dress to wear? Do you think that would help?"

The old man smiled. He took the mirror from her hand and put it carefully away.

"You have seen G-d," he said."

(Summary by Schram 1984, p. 41-42)

Individual

The princess is much like the individual response to a storytelling experience. The role of self-reflexivity to spiritual development is illustrated in the story when the princess peers into the mirror. As Schram (1984) notes, " . . . a mirror reflects the true or hidden self and lets you see the person you really are. It is the conscious. It can

show you the parts you do not see on the surface. The mirror separates the princess from the outer world so as to reflect into herself" (p. 42). Schram goes on to explain that listeners who hear this story share the experience with the storyteller, and are moved to follow the princess on her journey of self-evaluation. Thus, storytelling evokes a self-reflexive response, which in turn can help instill a sense of spirituality. Just as the princess did, by listening to a story, listeners can begin an individual search for G-d.

The search for spirituality sometimes demands listeners to reexamine existing beliefs. King (1992) suggests that storytelling plays a significant role in stimulating spiritual development by ". . . "breaking rather than simply reinforcing bonds of tradition" (p. 1). In this way, listeners are free to examine their own beliefs in a self reflexive manner. Myerhoff (1990) explains rituals, like storytelling (Kirkwood, 1983, 1992; Bauman, 1989) induce reflexive awareness. This reflexive awareness can allow listeners to find a "spiritual center" and challenge pre-existing beliefs. Like the princess who was formally spoiled and self important, listeners can look into the mirror of self and change negative behaviors.

The ritual act of telling a story itself may induce examination of a listener's repertoire of behaviors. Myerhoff (1990) notes, "Rituals . . . make self-reflection nearly inevitable, telling the individual what s/he is and is

not at once" (pg.?). Another spiritual state may come about through rituals: transcendence, where one is aware of simultaneously of being in flow as well as aware of his/her actions. As noted by Kirkwood (1983), this transcendence is important to the act of storytelling as it creates a new sense of awareness for listeners.

Universal

Clearly, storytelling can help induce a sense of spirituality on an individual level. However, storytelling is also an important mechanism for instilling spirituality on a group or universal level. Bauman (1989) notes, "Telling stories is literally a means of re-membering a dismembered way of life by insisting on the personalization of place, revivifying the ruins with direct social and contextual meaning" (p. 179). Through storytelling, past cultural values and morals become important to the present day. In a primarily anthropological study, Turner (1981) reveals (through his discussion of the Ndembu tribe of Zambia) how the understanding of "social dramas" of an individual people leads to an understanding of a cultural group. As Turner (1981) notes:

> The story itself still makes important points about family relationships and about the stresses between sex and age roles, and appears to be an emic generalization, clothed in metaphor and involving projection, of innumerable specific social dramas generated by these structural tensions; so does the

> story feed back into the social process, providing it with a rhetoric, a mode of emplotment, and a meaning. (149)

The story itself then, by "feeding back into the social process" (Turner, 1981) becomes "equipment" for understanding cultural elements of a given group. However, cultural elements of a group are not always understood with ease. Discovering "narrative possibilities" (Kirkwood, 1992) is an additional way in which both those outside and inside a given group can begin to examine, " . . . unfamiliar ideals which exceed people's beliefs and previous experience" (Kirkwood 1992, 30). The unfamiliar ideals or states of mind can be exposed by either telling stories which reflect a state of mind, or by enabling or challenging people to perform such acts themselves (Kirkwood, 1992). Dealing with foreign states of mind provide individuals an opportunity to examine how they function within a group. Schram (1984) notes, "In its most powerful aspects, a story gives hope, shows possibilities, is life-fulfilling, develops concern and sensitizes the listener to the feelings, dignity and rights of other people" (p. 43). Additionally, storytelling can help a listener to put their own personal importance in order. Schram (1984) also notes, "Hearing and telling stories foster not only a sense of group unity but also a sense of balance which enables him to become part of a group by considering 'his personal existence less valuable than the existence of the group'" (p. 43).

Benefits for the Multicultural Class

Instilling spirituality on an individual and group level is an important function of storytelling for a multicultural class. Part of the value in storytelling for a multicultural audience is the universality of the story. Schram (1984) notes, " . . . all persons carry within themselves an entire tribe with a complete history of legends, songs, and movements, in addition to a whole repertoire of voices, tastes, smells, memories, and hopes" (33). Although Schram's (1984) essay primarily speaks to the transmission of Jewish values through storytelling, the universality of the storytelling experience can be extended to include other cultures. As Schram (1984) notes, "Storytelling is uniquely suited for the transmission of values of a religious and cultural heritage" (43). All groups can transmit values through storytelling. For a multicultural class, value transmission is important in creating identification among dissimilar groups.

## Peace to the Multicultural Classroom

The benefits of storytelling go beyond building dialogue and instilling a sense of spirituality. For the educator in the multicultural classroom, storytelling can help instill a sense of unity and peace to a classroom plague by division and divisiveness. Peace is brought to the multicultural classroom by changing the relationship between the speaker

and the listener, instilling identification, and discussing new lines of thought after the storytelling experience.

Speaker-Listener Relationship

The act of storytelling, especially involving the sharing of folktales, is important in changing the relationship between the speaker and audience. Kirkwood (1983) points out that "narratives evoke the emotive, non-theoretical, uncritical responses characteristic of children" (p. 72). For this reason, the relationship between the teller and the listener is transformed to a state of non-intellectualization--neither the teller, nor the listener challenges the story as it is told. By doing so, the roles of both the teller and the listener change from an argumentative, adversarial relationship into one more intimate and nurturing (Kirkwood, 1983).

Both Kirkwood (1983,1992) and Sarris (1990) discuss that the act of storytelling along with the folktales facilitates self-confrontation of the listener. When a story is told the listener begins to question and examine assumptions they hold of other cultures (Sarris, 1990). Additionally, a listener can begin to create a shared understanding and awareness of the "reality of the human condition" (Kirkwood, 1983, p. 73). Through such a transformation of consciousness, listeners and speakers in a multicultural audience begin to understand that they may have more in common with an "other" than they had previously realized.

Identification

As the relationship between the speaker and the listener is transformed, identification is forged. In order to create multicultural understanding and bring peace the divided classroom, identification must take place. Through the process of identification, the multicultural audience realizes how they are joined. As Burke (1962) notes, "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (p. 20). The storytelling experience allows multicultural audiences to believe their interests are joined. By providing audiences with the experience to identify with someone from a different culture, storytelling creates a mutually supportive, creative communication climate.

Some forms of storytelling help the process of identification more than others. Folktales are valuable to increasing communication in a multicultural context. As Bauman (1989) notes, " . . . folklore is the possession or the inheritance of the people. . . " (176). Because folktales are based in individual cultures, speakers and listeners can begin to ". . . experience other cultures and understand the diversity of the wishes, dream, and problems of people around the world" (Santino 1991, p. 77). This "sharing" takes place through the act of storytelling, as the sharing of stories contributes to the creation of a non-

intellectualized, non-judgmental state in listeners. As Kirkwood (1983), points out, this non-intellectualized state ". . . may change an argumentative, adversarial relationship into one more intimate and nurturing . . . " (p. 72). Once a more tolerant state is developed, folk stories allow for the sharing of values to take place, and through this, people begin to identify with one another.

Discussion After the Storytelling Experience

Dialogue which follows the storytelling session helps listeners construct and assess lines of reasoning from multiple conflicting points of view (Sarris 1990; Schram, 1984; Kirkwood, 1992). Babcock (1977) points out, "The storyteller not only must create an illusion of reality but must make certain that we are aware that it *is* an illusion, and for this metanarration [narration about the narration] is essential" (70). Several researchers agree with Babcock's (1977) assertion. Sarris (1990) notes that discussions that follow the storytelling event can be problem-exposing rather than problem solving, meaning that while the problems which exist may be exposed, answers to the problems are not necessarily addressed, nor do they need to be. Schram (1984) extends this line of reasoning, and notes that, "There is an immediate, palpable, symbiotic interaction between teller and listener. The teller guides the listeners to the story's powerful conclusion and, equally important, the teller is there to share the impact when the moment of understanding is reached" (42). The folktale, combined with the storytelling

experience and the post-storytelling discussion, work in synthesis with one another to create a transformation of consciousness. Through such a transformation of consciousness, speakers and listeners of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds begin realize some of their personal concerns are shared by people previously thought to be "different", or even enemies.

Davies (1993) uses storytelling in a multicultural classroom as a way to create harmony:

> As noted by the instructor of the ESL class, after the project was completed, the class changed. Students who wouldn't speak to anyone without the same background began to share recipes with students from countries other than their own. The seating arrangement moved from being dominated by "cliques" to one where students felt comfortable sitting next to someone from a different country. Students communicated freely with one another, regardless of differences in ideological backgrounds or countries of origin (p. 15-16).

Sarris (1990) recalls a similar experience occurred in one of his classes. After a heated sharing of stories between a Jewish woman and a traditional Arabic man, the two discussed an area of commonalty. "After the class, the Jewish woman approached the Arab and said, 'I do not agree

with you, but I understand you better'" (p. 183). Whether or not the students in the multicultural class agreed with one another is not important. What is important is they leave the class with an understanding of, and identification with people with backgrounds different from their own.

## Conclusions

Communication scholars are uniquely suited to developing and implementing mechanisms which will promote and multicultural dialogue and build community. Storytelling is one such mechanism. Of course, storytelling is not a panacea. Some groups are so divided that getting them into a room together to share in a storytelling experience would be next to impossible. For many groups, however, storytelling is a way in which a communication scholar can encourage perspective-taking. Strides can and should be taken to encourage dialogue in the multicultural classroom among individuals of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the storytelling experience is the role of spiritual development as a way to build community and increase peace. Although this study sought to pigeonhole spirituality as a benefit of storytelling, in some cases storytelling takes on a spiritual component, such as Schram (1984) discusses. Community building, whether on a global or particularistic level, depends on individuals realizing they are a part of something larger than themselves. To this end, spiritual development

and community building are inextricably linked to one another.

Universities around the country are developing courses that encourage interaction with individuals from other cultures, or the study of cultures previously considered "other." Northern Kentucky University, for example, has a 'Race/Gender Perspective' component to their basic studies requirements, and other universities have similar programs. Although these courses may not be a remedy for racism or hatred, they are a step toward the development of a multicultural dialogue.

As 'agents of moral change',storytelling in the classroom is also important for the rhetorical critic. Storytelling in the multicultural classroom provides an opportunity to link theory and practice in a way which is unique. Stories may be shared with a class, collected from students, and analyzed for elements that add to the process of identification. Not only does this activity provide critics with artifacts to analyze, but as Davies (1993) notes, provide the multicultural class with fewer barriers and more opportunity for interaction.

As the face of America changes, so too will the ways in which Americans interact with one another have to change. People with differing cultural background are bound to have a variety of behaviors unfamiliar to some. By developing mechanisms that link people of dissimilar groups, communication scholars can find ways in which we can all

'celebrate our differences.' Hopefully, this activity will go beyond the academic theme of Building Community, and extend to all of our activities.

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